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NEW YORK TIMES
29 DECEMBER 1982

U.S. Intrigued but Uncertain On a Bulgarian Tie to Pope

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 28 — United States intelligence officials remain intrigued but unconvinced by allegations in Italy that Bulgaria instigated the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, Administration officials said today.

Because of the explosive implications for East-West relations if a Bulgarian connection is proved, the inability of American intelligence agencies to draw any firm conclusions from the available evidence has persuaded the State Department that the best policy for the United States is to say little and wait for Italy to complete its investigation, the officials said.

Officials familiar with the Central Intelligence Agency's work in the case said there was considerable evidence linking Bulgaria to espionage and terrorist activity in Italy and elsewhere. But the information available to the United States, much of it provided by the Italians, has failed to convince American officials that Bulgarian agents hired Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turk, to shoot the Pope on May 13, 1981.

Italian Leaders Divided

One of the problems for the Administration is that Italian leaders are divided on the case. The Socialist Party, part of the coalition Government, has accused the Bulgarians and, by implication, the Soviet Union of instigating the plot against the Pope as well as in gunrunning, drug smuggling and cooperation with Italian Red Brigades terrorists.

But the dominant Christian Democrats have been more restrained and have argued that until the investigating magistrate, Ilario Martella, completes his inquiry, no conclusions should be drawn in public about international involvement. As a result, a feud has erupted between the two parties.

In a debate in Parliament last week, Defense Minister Lelio Lagorio, a Socialist, was much more categorical in accusing the Bulgarians and the Russians of involvement than were Christian Democratic ministers.

When Secretary of State George P. Shultz held talks in Rome on Dec. 13 with the Pope and Italian officials, the investigation was a major subject.

Foreign Minister's Stand

Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo, a Christian Democrat, said at a joint press conference with Mr. Shultz that "we are following with great concern the evolution of this situation."

"The data that we do have at the moment is not complete, and not everything has been confirmed," he said. "We will give a political assessment when all the necessary data has been collected and, most of all, confirmed."

He noted that the charges of Bulgarian and, by implication, Soviet involvement were "very serious." If the allegations are proved, he said, Italy will bring the information to the attention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

But when asked if there might be a link between the shooting of the Pope and the Soviet Government, Mr. Colombo, said, "I don't feel that you can draw the conclusions in the direction you seem to be going."

Mr. Shultz said then, "I don't think it is well to speculate on this and I would only echo what Foreign Minister Colombo has just said, that it is a serious investigation with important implications, and we'll await the developments of the investigation."

Interior Minister Virginio Rogni, a Christian Democrat, said in an interview in Le Monde last week that the new developments came from revelations by Mr. Agca, who originally said he committed the crime by himself. He was sentenced to life imprisonment.

"There may be various reasons for that change of attitude by Agca," Mr. Rogni said. "It is not impossible that he hopes to be able to obtain certain advantages allowed by the law." In Italy, a convicted terrorist's sentence can be cut in half if he confesses fully.

A senior Administration official said the American intelligence agencies' position was to "wait and see."

"The evidence from the various Italian authorities is not wholly convincing," he said. "The evidence of which we are aware is not wholly convincing. This is not to say that the possibility of a Bulgarian connection is ruled out, but we need more information before we can come to a firm judgment."

One official said that there was strong evidence to link the Bulgarians to espionage activity in Italy and to support for Red Brigades and Palestinian terrorist groups. He said the Italians had information that after Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier was kidnapped last December, the Bulgarians gave the Red Brigades questions to pose to him.

This explains, the official said, why radio transmissions from the Bulgarian Embassy increased while General Dozier was being held.

State Department officials said solid information linking the Bulgarians to the shooting would be a propaganda windfall for the West because the as-

sumption would be made around the world that the Bulgarians would not have acted without Soviet collusion.

But officials said that Mr. Shultz wanted to be certain of the evidence before the United States spoke out to avoid the impression that the evidence was being fabricated in Washington.

Officials here said there had been no decisions on what action NATO will take if, in fact, a Bulgarian connection is proved. One senior official said today that he doubted that there would be much sentiment for breaking off negotiations with the Soviet Union on such issues as arms control.

Issue of Bulgarian's Alibi

ROME, Dec. 28 (AP) — The prosecutor investigating the shooting of Pope John Paul II will question several witnesses who defense attorneys say support the alibi of a Bulgarian charged in the attack, the Italian news agency ANSA said.

It quoted a lawyer for the Bulgarian, Sergei Ivanov Antonov, as saying that the state prosecutor, Ilario Martella, had agreed to talk to the witnesses in the next few days.

Mr. Antonov, director of the Bulgarian state airlines in Rome, was arrested Nov. 25 and charged with complicity in the attack on the Pope.

Mr. Martella has never publicly said what role Mr. Antonov purportedly played in the assassination attempt. Italian newspapers have reported that Mr. Agca told investigators that Mr. Antonov's apartment was used to plan the attack and that he was in St. Peter's Square along with two unidentified Turks to help Mr. Agca escape after shooting the Pope.

Giuseppe Consolo, one of Mr. Antonov's two Italian lawyers, has said he could prove that his 35-year-old client was in his Rome office and not in St. Peter's Square on the day of the attack and that he had several witnesses to support the alibi.

Bulgaria Publishes Report

VIENNA, Dec. 28 (AP) — Bulgaria's official press agency has published a 72-page document outlining Western reports of allegations that Bulgarians were implicated in the shooting of Pope John Paul II, the agency said today.

"Through this publication the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency wants to make the public familiar with the stages of the anti-Bulgarian and antisocialist campaign in greater details," it said.

It said the report was called "Anatomy of a Slander" and was on sale at newsstands in Bulgaria.